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White and minority employee reactions to perceived discrimination at work: evidence of White fragility?

White fragility

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Abstract

Purpose – Building on the notion of “White fragility,” this study aims to explore how Whites react and cope with perceived discrimination at work. Specifically, the authors explore whether: (1) Whites react more negatively than minorities when they perceive discrimination at work and (2) Whites are more likely than minorities to restore the status quo by leaving the situation when they perceive discrimination at work.

Design/methodology/approach – Data for this study were obtained from the Professional Worker Career Experience Survey. In total, 527 working professionals from multiple organizations across the central USA participated in the survey.

Findings – The authors find evidence that Whites experience more negative psychological effects (i.e. lower job satisfaction and higher work stress) from perceived discrimination than minority employees and are more likely to act to restore conditions of privilege by leaving their current job and employer. The stronger negative effects of perceived discrimination for Whites (vs minorities) were restricted to work outcomes (job satisfaction, work stress, turnover intentions from one’s employer) and were not evident with respect to perceptions of overall well-being (i.e. life satisfaction), suggesting that White fragility may play a particularly influential role in work settings, wherein racial stress may be more readily activated.

Originality/value – Consistent with the notion of White fragility, the study’s results demonstrate that the deleterious impact of perceived discrimination on employee work outcomes may, in some cases, be stronger for White than minority employees.

Keywords Work stress, Job satisfaction, Perceived discrimination, Racial stress, White fragility

Paper type Research paper

“When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression” – Unknown

Introduction

Research on workplace discrimination in the USA has typically focused on racial and ethnic minorities such as African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans (Deitch *et al.*, 2003; Dovidio *et al.*, 2010; Sanchez and Brock, 1996; Triana *et al.*, 2015). By contrast, little to no research attention has been cast on perceived workplace discrimination experienced by White employees (Crosby *et al.*, 1980; Krieger and Sidney, 1996). Although Whites form the dominant group in organizations and society, and enjoy considerable advantage in the workplace, it is possible for them to perceive discrimination, oppression and anti-White bias



on account of race (Avery *et al.*, 2018; Norton and Sommers, 2011). Results from the “American Values Survey” indicate that this sentiment is shared by a majority (52%) of White respondents who agree that “discrimination against Whites has become as big of a problem as discrimination against minorities” (Piacenza, 2014). Indeed, some White employees consider affirmative action policies to be a form of anti-White discrimination (Ely, 1974; Kluegel and Smith, 1982), evoking a range of emotional responses from silence to compensatory backlash (Harrison *et al.*, 2006; Lam and Ng, 2020; Lowery *et al.*, 2006; McGowan and Ng, 2016)

Since Whites have been insulated from discrimination due to their dominant status, there have been suggestions that Whites experience greater “racial stress” – defined as stress individuals experience as a result of a perception of racism or discrimination (cf. Rucker *et al.*, 2010) – and react more negatively when they encounter discrimination or are confronted about their privilege (Applebaum, 2017; Hall, 2015; Hines, 2016). Increasing media attention covering complaints of discrimination against Whites (Bundale, 2017; Touré, 2015), coupled with the paradox of White privilege, has led critical race scholar Robin DiAngelo (2011) to coin the phrase “White fragility” to refer to a “state in which even a minimal amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (p. 54). According to DiAngelo (2011, 2018), Whites will counteract this discomfort (i.e. “race-based” stress) and move to restore the status quo. As an example of this, Whites have the privilege of exiting the uncomfortable (racial) situation, which is frequently not available to racial minorities.

The issue of Whiteness in organizations – a raceless resource prototype of the ideal employee – has rarely been examined in the management literature (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014). This perspective argues that Whites are assumed to be raceless, and the issue of race is only a problem for non-Whites. The dominance of Whites is, therefore, not challenged, leaving them free to reproduce their power and privilege in organizations. Their rise to leadership positions and well-paying jobs are naturally assumed to be a function of one’s “individual effort and merit” (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014, p. 395). Because of these factors, Whites have become accustomed to racial comfort (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 60), exposing them to experience racial stress when their privilege is questioned.

Given the paucity of both theoretical and empirical research on White fragility in the workplace, we aim to explore how Whites react and cope with perceived discrimination at work. Specifically, we focus our attention on perceived discrimination of White *vis-à-vis* minority employees and explore two primary research questions: (1) Do Whites react more negatively than minorities when they perceive discrimination at work? (i.e. the crux of the White fragility hypothesis) and (2) Are Whites more likely than minorities to restore the status quo by leaving the situation when they perceive discrimination at work?

Conceptual background and hypotheses

A large body of literature has documented the negative effects of perceived discrimination in the workplace. Perceived discrimination has been shown to contribute to workplace stress (Broman *et al.*, 2000; Mays *et al.*, 1996; Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009), poorer health outcomes (Din-Dzietham *et al.*, 2004; Pavalko *et al.*, 2003) and lower life satisfaction and well-being (Deitch *et al.*, 2003; Moore *et al.*, 2011). In the workplace, perceived discrimination is also associated with a range of negative work attitudes, such as lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, greater turnover intentions (Deitch *et al.*, 2003; Ensher *et al.*, 2001; Sanchez and Brock, 1996; Triana, Jayasinghe and Pieper, 2015) and poorer career outcomes, such as lower wages and fewer promotional opportunities (Krieger *et al.*, 2006; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001).

It is widely held that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to perceive discrimination than Whites (Avery *et al.*, 2008; Krieger *et al.*, 2006; Triana *et al.*, 2015) by virtue of the greater

prejudice they experience, their unequal status and their devalued identities (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999; Crosby *et al.*, 1980; Kirton, 2009; Ryff *et al.*, 2003; Sellers and Shelton, 2003). According to Goffman (1963), individuals with a stigmatized identity (e.g. racial and ethnic minorities) are more likely to anticipate discrimination, which in turn, heightens their expectations of being targets of future discrimination. Whites, on the other hand, perceive discrimination less frequently than racial minorities because of the advantages they accrue due to their race and/or group-based identity (Hudson, 2017; Leonardo, 2004; Schmitt and Branscombe, 2002). Drawing on this previous work and to provide a foundation for further hypothesis development, we propose the following:

- H1a.* Minority employees are more likely to perceive discrimination than White employees.
- H1b.* Perceived discrimination is associated with negative work outcomes and perceptions of well-being, including lower job satisfaction, greater work stress, lower life satisfaction and greater intentions to leave one's employer and their career field.

White reactions to affirmative action and White privilege

To the extent that Whites experience discrimination less frequently than minority employees and may be more insulated from dealing with issues of race, this raises the question: are Whites more susceptible and less able to cope with racial stress? Conversations about race in the USA often revolve around two highly charged topics. The first involves asking Whites about their attitudes toward affirmative action programs, which they may view as providing favoritism to disadvantaged groups. A second involves confronting Whites about their advantages (i.e. White privilege) in the workplace or society. Previous research relating to these two topics – White reactions to affirmative action and White privilege – can offer us insight into how Whites might respond to racial stress when they perceive discrimination at work (Jaschik, 2017).

Affirmative action

In general, Whites espouse more positive attitudes toward affirmative action when it involves providing equal opportunities to *all*, but voice strong opposition when affirmative action involves giving preferential treatment to minorities to close underrepresentation gaps (Dovidio *et al.*, 1989; Harrison *et al.*, 2006; Kinder and Sanders, 1990; Kravitz and Platania, 1993). Although some research connects racist attitudes with opposition to affirmative action policies (Kuklinski *et al.*, 1997; Sidanius *et al.*, 1996), Whites are generally opposed to affirmative action when self-interest is at stake or when there is denial in the distribution of opportunities (Bobo, 1998; Hughes, 1997; Jacobson, 1985; Kluegel and Smith, 1983). However, when Whites are told that affirmative action is not detrimental to them (as a group), their opposition to such policies tends to diminish (Lowery *et al.*, 2006). Whites who voice support for affirmative action do so when they wish to appear “politically correct” in public (VanBoven, 2000), out of guilt (Iyer *et al.*, 2003; Swim and Miller, 1999) or when they are cued (Case, 2007). Of note, even progressives (i.e. college educated Whites) overestimate their peers' support and underestimate their peers' opposition to affirmative action (VanBoven, 2000). DiAngelo (2011) observes the contradiction between Whites' denial of racial advantage and the vigorous defense of their collective position, and at the same time, their insistence on being treated as individuals, which allows them to hide and distance themselves from the actions of their own racial groups. This contradiction in turn enables them to reinforce their racial advantage, and at the same time, disavow charges of racism.

Complementing racial stress, “White anxiety” – or fear of being displaced, outnumbered and being discriminated against (Chua, 2018, p. 170) – is on the rise. The Pew Research Center projects that Whites will no longer be a majority by 2055 (the US Census predicts 2044), making Whites feel endangered and marginalized (cf. Chua, 2018). Elite colleges are engaging in higher levels of outreach to minority groups, and are, in some cases, excluding Whites (Dobbs, 2003; Steinmetz, 2010). In the workplace, some White employees feel victimized by affirmative action policies and see it as discrimination against them. Indeed, in a recent US Supreme Court ruling, the City of New Haven was found to be biased against White firefighters by refusing to promote them over minority firefighters also seeking promotion (Liptak, 2009). Political leaders have also contributed to increasing racial tension in the USA. For example, Steve Bannon, former White House chief strategist to President Trump, (incorrectly) claimed that “. . . two-thirds or three-quarters of the CEOs in Silicon Valley are from South Asia or from Asia. . .” (Bump, 2017). It should, therefore, perhaps come as no surprise that recent public surveys, including the 2016 American National Election Survey, show that there is a growing perception among Whites that they are being treated unfairly (cf. Tesler and Sides, 2016). Social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #OscarSoWhite may also contribute to Whites feeling increased anxiety and race-based stress. Some Whites may feel they are “under attack” from Blacks and other minority groups and are uncomfortable with challenges to their dominant status.

Indeed, since the election of President Obama, many argue that affirmative action is no longer necessary (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, 2011; Knowles *et al.*, 2009), suggesting that racism is no longer a factor affecting minorities’ life chances (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This perspective is consistent with a post-multiculturalism, post-racial view that is emerging in the USA and elsewhere (Nkomo and Hoobler, 2014). Some progressive Whites profess not to see race and subscribe to a color-blind approach to affirmative action (Awad *et al.*, 2005; Jayakumar and Adamian, 2017). Many consider “fairness” and “meritocracy” as cornerstones of American values (Crosby *et al.*, 2003; Williams *et al.*, 1999), and affirmative action policies violate traditional American values of self-reliance and hard work (Hughes, 1997; Hines, 2016). They use coded language such as “merit-based,” “fair competition” and “less qualified” to imply that affirmative action is unfair and disadvantages Whites (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Wallace and Allen, 2016). This “race-blind” perspective shields Whites from acknowledging their privilege, which in turn reinforces their dominance and racial comfort (DiAngelo, 2011). Gutiérrez and Saint Clair (2018) report that Whites who score high on social dominance also have more negative reactions toward minority targeted hiring. Some Whites have extended these arguments further to suggest that Blacks do not deserve any special help, and that affirmative action poses an economic, social and political threat to Whites (Hughes, 1997). In sum, Whites may, in some cases, fear that affirmative action erodes their position in society and may, therefore, perceive these policies as anti-White discrimination.

White privilege

Another topic that causes some Whites to feel uncomfortable are discussions regarding White privilege (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018; Lowery *et al.*, 2007). Whites generally have low awareness of their own privilege (Ancis and Szymanski, 2001; Hays *et al.*, 2008), and any discussion on the topic will cause them to experience discomfort and stress (Applebaum, 2017; Copeland, 2008). DiAngelo (2011) suggests that Whites have been largely insulated from race-based stress, and consequently, have not developed the ability or stamina to cope with racial stress, leading to what she describes as “White fragility.” In response to exposure to race-based stress, DiAngelo (2011) argues that Whites will engage in behaviors to remove the racial stress and restore the status quo. They include “the outward display of emotions

such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-induced situation” (p. 54). Thus, when confronted with White privilege, Whites generally engage in a range of responses from avoidance and denial to agitation and anger (Applebaum, 2017; Patton and Jordan, 2017; Solomona *et al.*, 2005).

Schmitt and Branscombe (2002) observe that the threat of discrimination against racial minorities is persistent, often results in negative outcomes and there is little racial minorities can do to prevent acts of discrimination. Whites, on the other hand, experience discrimination rather minimally and infrequently, and they can avoid or prevent discrimination by simply maintaining or protecting their dominant position (Marshburn *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, when Whites are asked to describe their experiences with discrimination, they tend to relate to minor events such as the lack of “White only” organizations or being accused of being racially biased. Racial minorities, on the other hand, tend to report more severe and pervasive forms of discrimination relating to important life domains such as housing, education and employment (e.g. Harris and Ogbonna, 2016; Rafferty, 2012; Schmitt and Branscombe, 2002). Furthermore, minorities experience discrimination more frequently than Whites in daily life (e.g. being followed around in a store or asked for identification) (Deitch *et al.*, 2003). In this respect, racial minorities are said to have “internalized racism” (Pyke, 2010) and have developed a stronger capacity to cope with racial stress over extended periods of time (Bernstein, 2011). On this basis, and in line with DiAngelo’s concept of White fragility, we hypothesize that:

- H2.* White employees will report less satisfaction with their work situation (i.e. lower job satisfaction) and lower well-being (i.e. higher work stress, lower life satisfaction) than minority employees when they perceive discrimination at work.

According to DiAngelo, when Whites experience race-based stress, they engage in a number of defensive moves. These defensive moves are intended to remove any racial inconvenience and/or to maintain White equilibrium (i.e. restore privilege) arising from perceived discrimination (Leach *et al.*, 2007). Research on perceived discrimination further suggests that individuals feeling deprived (of opportunities) will seek to protect themselves through means that counteract that deprivation (Dion, 1986; Kluegel and Smith, 1982; Lalonde and Cameron, 1994). For example, there is evidence that Whites concerned that minority gains are being made at their expense (Lowery *et al.*, 2007; Norton and Sommers, 2011; Outten *et al.*, 2012) may be motivated by self-interest and group preservation to reinstate the status quo. In this regard, Hall (2015) observes that White students are willing to fight affirmative action policies through litigation to restore their chances of elite college admissions. In the same vein, White employees who perceive race-based discrimination at work and feel deprived of opportunities may seek to restore their privilege by expressing a desire to leave the organization. Whites may rationalize that by switching employers they are able to counteract being denied equal opportunities at their current workplace and restore their privilege elsewhere. Minority employees, however, do not have this option, given that they will likely encounter discrimination elsewhere (see *H4* below). On this basis, we hypothesize that:

- H3.* White employees are more likely to leave their organization (i.e. report higher turnover intentions from their current employer) when they experience discrimination at work than minority employees.

Building on *H3*, we expect that White employees are less likely than minorities to switch their careers (field of work) to avoid discrimination. When Whites perceive discrimination at work, they may switch employers to avoid future discrimination, believing that this discrimination may be confined largely to their current organization and not others. Minorities, on the other hand, carry the burden of devalued identities resulting from internalized racism and have come to accept their disadvantage in the workplace and society (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990). In this

respect, compared to Whites, minorities may find it pointless to leave their current employer due to a perception that discrimination will likely exist across different organizations. Minorities may, therefore, feel they have to take more extreme action than Whites, such as leaving their career field altogether, to avoid pervasive discrimination in the profession. Indeed, past research suggests that individuals who are in disadvantaged positions are much more willing to accept concessions at work and are also more likely to apply for jobs that extend beyond their areas of expertise (e.g. [Pager and Pedulla, 2015](#)). Individuals with stigmatized identities (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgenders (LGBTs)) may be particularly likely to accept a less than ideal job due to the high levels of discrimination they may face across employers ([Ng et al., 2012](#); [Flage, 2019](#)). Likewise, past studies have consistently shown that highly skilled non-White immigrants to the USA are more willing to take on low-status jobs compared to their White counterparts, leading to underemployment despite being highly trained in their profession ([Batalova et al., 2016](#); [Danso, 2007](#); [DeJong and Madamba, 2001](#)). Based on the preceding discussion, and DiAngelo's proposition that Whites will seek to maintain their privilege when they encounter racial stress and adversity, we expect that Whites will be less likely than minorities to compromise their career by expressing their intentions to leave their career field in response to perceived discrimination. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

- H4.* White employees are less likely to leave their career field (i.e. report lower turnover intentions relating to their career) when they experience discrimination at work than minority employees.

[Figure 1](#) provides a visual illustration of the hypotheses tested in this study.

Method

Sample and procedure

Data used in this study were obtained from the Professional Worker Career Experience Survey (PWCES) dataset ([Rosenbloom and Ash, 2009](#)). In total, 752 working professionals from multiple organizations across the central USA participated in the survey. Participants were contacted via email lists provided by various professional associations. Among the 752

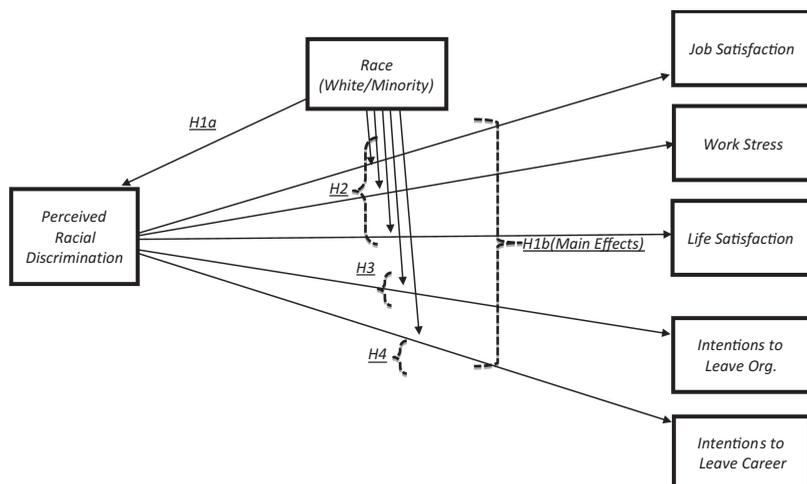


Figure 1.
Summary of
hypotheses

participants, 527 provided complete responses for all variables assessed in the study, forming the final sample. The average age of respondents was 38.8 ($SD = 9.72$). The majority of participants (92.1%) were White; 58% were male. Most participants reported having a university education – 46.3% had completed a bachelor's degree and 44.2% had a master's degree or above. A wide range of professions were represented in the sample – 30.6% of participants were in business and financial occupations, 27% were in computer and mathematical occupations and 42.4% were in various other occupations.

Measures

Perceived racial discrimination at work. Five items adapted from previous measures (e.g. the Major Experiences of Discrimination scale – Williams *et al.*, 2008) were used to assess perceived racial discrimination in the workplace. Participants rated their level of agreement with each item on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Sample items include: “I have been denied a promotion because of my race” and “I have been denied a job for which I was qualified because of my race.” Cronbach's alpha was 0.85.

Job satisfaction. Spector's (1985) 18-item Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) was used to measure job satisfaction. The JSS assesses nine dimensions of job satisfaction, including satisfaction with supervision, salary, benefits, co-workers, contingent rewards, operating procedures, communication, promotion and work. Sample items include: “my job is enjoyable” and “I feel the work I do is appreciated.” Using a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree), respondents rated their level of agreement with each item. All items scores were aggregated to form an overall index of job satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha was 0.79.

Work stress. The six-item work stress scale developed by Lait and Wallace (2002) was used to measure participants' reports of work stress. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each item using a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). A sample item is “I feel overwhelmed by my work.” Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured using Diener *et al.*'s (1985) five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale. Respondents reported their level of agreement with using a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). A sample item is “In most ways my life is close to ideal.” Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

Turnover intentions. Participants' intentions to leave: (1) their organization and (2) their career field were assessed using two six-item scales. Adapted from existing measures (e.g. see Bentein *et al.*, 2005; Shore and Martin, 1989), sample items include: “In the past year, I have thought about looking for a job with a different employer” (intentions to leave the organization) and “I plan to seek employment in a different field during the next year” (intentions to leave career field). Respondents recorded their responses using a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Alpha coefficients for the two scales were: 0.83 (turnover intentions from the organization) and 0.87 (turnover intentions from career field), respectively.

Demographic/control variables. Consistent with previous research examining the effects of perceived discrimination on work outcomes (e.g. see Triana *et al.*, 2015; Triana *et al.*, 2015)), participants' gender (0 = men and 1 = women), job tenure and organizational tenure (number of years) were included as control variables in the study. Race (Whites = 0; racial minorities (“non-Whites”) = 1) was assessed by asking respondents to self-report their race.

Results

The means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations for all study variables are reported in Table 1. Ratings on the measure of perceived discrimination were somewhat low overall (1.39 out of 6) but demonstrated significant variation across respondents ($sd = 0.76$, range = 1 to 5.8). Furthermore, as expected, racial minorities reported significantly higher

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics
and zero-order
correlations for
variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Perceived discrimination	1.39	0.76	—								
2. Job satisfaction	4.30	0.78	-0.20**	—							
3. Work stress	2.43	1.22	0.10*	-0.63**	—						
4. Intention to leave organization	3.22	1.31	0.10*	-0.51**	0.39**	—					
5. Intention to career field	2.54	1.29	0.11*	-0.44**	0.39**	0.64**	—				
6. Life satisfaction	4.31	1.13	-0.15**	0.43**	-0.42**	-0.27**	-0.27**	—			
7. Job tenure	4.32	4.47	0.05	-0.01	0.03	-0.16**	-0.05	-0.03	—		
8. Organization tenure	7.11	6.64	0.04	0.01	0.04	-0.20**	-0.07	-0.01	0.60**	—	
9. Gender	0.42	0.49	0.01	0.04	0.04	-0.07	-0.03	0.07	-0.03	0.01	—
10. Race	0.08	0.27	0.37**	0.00	-0.04	0.05	0.00	-0.04	0.01	0.01	0.03

Note(s): *N* = 527; **p* < 0.01; ***p* < 0.001; gender: 0 = male, 1 = female; race: 0 = White, 1 = minority

levels of perceived discrimination than Whites ($t(695) = 5.161, p < 0.001$; M for minorities: = 2.35; M for Whites: = 1.30), providing support for H1(a). White fragility

To test the main effects (H1b) and each of the respective interactions (H2–H4) outlined in our hypotheses, five hierarchical moderated regression analyses were conducted – one for each respective dependent variable (i.e. job satisfaction, work stress, life satisfaction, turnover intentions from the organization, turnover intentions from career field). In each of these regressions, the control variables – gender, job tenure and organization tenure – were entered in the first block, followed by the main effect terms of perceived discrimination and race in the second block, and the hypothesized interaction term of perceived discrimination \times race in the final block. The results from these analyses are reported in Table 2.

H1(b) predicted that perceived racial discrimination will negatively influence employee perceptions of their work situation and their well-being. Consistent with these predictions, Table 2 indicates that perceived discrimination was negatively associated with both job satisfaction ($\beta = -0.28, p < 0.001$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.15, p < 0.001$). Moreover, perceived discrimination was positively associated with perceptions of work stress ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$) and turnover intentions relating to both one’s organization ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.01$) and one’s career field ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$). Taken together, this pattern of results supports H1(b), signaling that perceived discrimination negatively impacts a number of employee work and career outcomes.

In H2, we proposed that race will moderate the effects of perceived discrimination, such that the negative influence of perceived discrimination on employee job satisfaction and well-being (i.e. work stress, life satisfaction) will be more pronounced for White compared to minority employees. As indicated in Table 2, race moderated the relationship between perceived discrimination and both job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$) and work stress ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.01$), but did not moderate the influence of perceived discrimination on life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.02, ns$). As illustrated in Figure 2, the magnitude of the negative relationship between perceived discrimination and job satisfaction was discernibly stronger for White (simple slope = $-0.24, p < 0.001$) relative to minority employees; indeed, perceived discrimination was not significantly associated with job satisfaction for minority workers (simple slope = $-0.09, ns$). Likewise, as shown in Figure 3, perceived discrimination was significantly positively associated with work stress for White employees (simple slope = $0.16, p < 0.001$); however, this relationship was not observed for minority

Predictor	Job satisfaction	Work stress	Life satisfaction	Intention to leave organization	Intention to leave career field
<i>Step 1</i>					
Gender	0.03	0.04	0.07	-0.05	0.01
Job tenure	-0.02	0.00	-0.04	-0.08	-0.03
Organization tenure	0.02	0.04	0.01	-0.14**	-0.03
Adjusted total R^2	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04***	0.00
<i>Step 2</i>					
Perceived discrimination	-0.28***	0.19***	-0.15***	0.14**	0.13**
Race	0.04	-0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00
Adjusted total R^2	0.03***	0.01**	0.02***	0.04***	0.01
ΔR^2	0.03***	0.01**	0.02***	0.00	0.01
<i>Step 3</i>					
Perceived discrimination \times Race	0.12*	-0.14**	-0.02	-0.11*	-0.07
Adjusted total R^2	0.04***	0.01**	0.02***	0.05***	0.01
ΔR^2	0.01*	0.02**	0.00	0.01*	0.00

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2.
Moderated multiple regression results

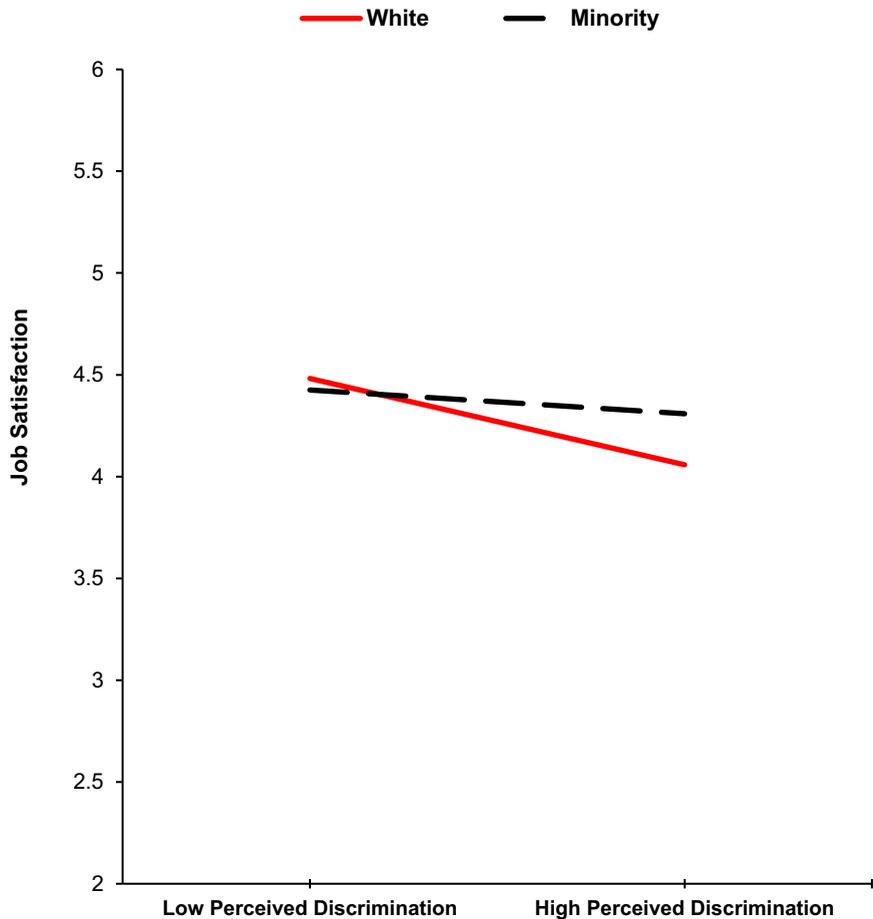
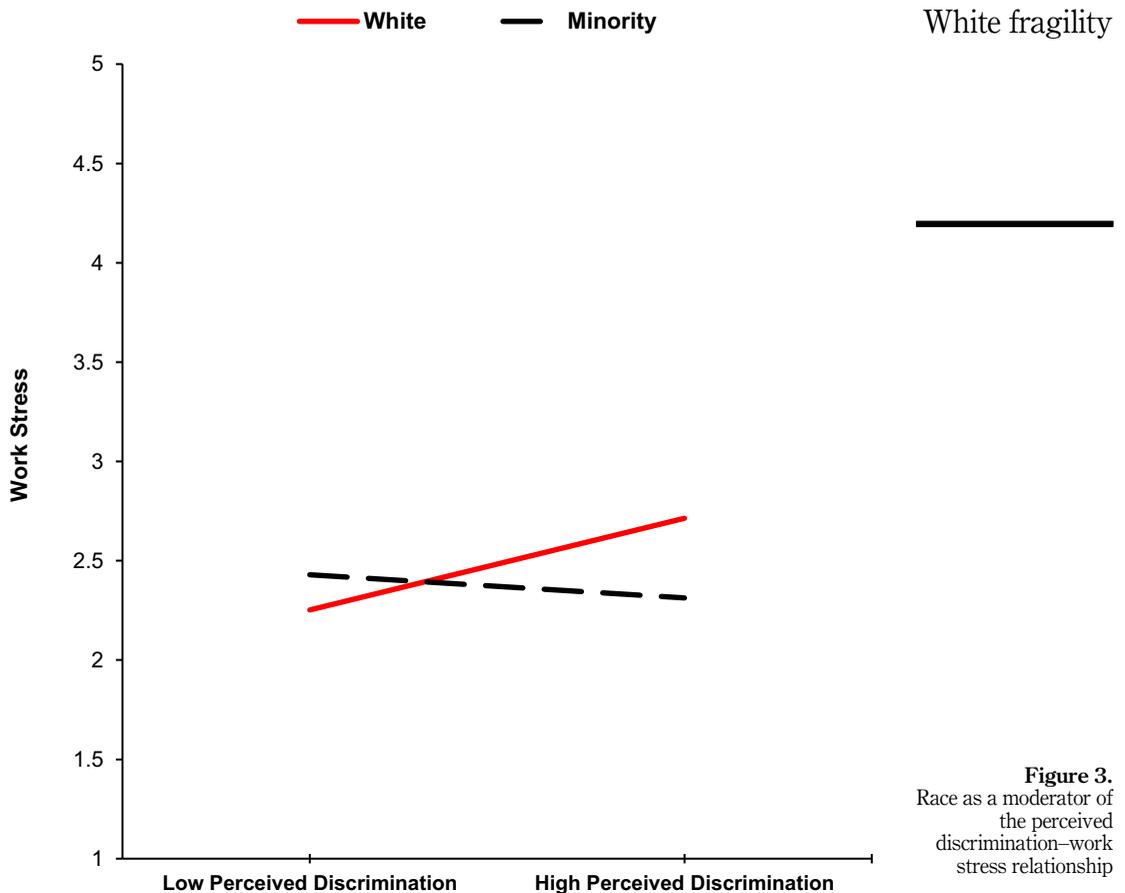


Figure 2.
Race as a moderator of
the perceived
discrimination–job
satisfaction
relationship

employees (simple slope = -0.04 , *ns*). Taken together, these results provide partial support for H2, indicating that when Whites perceive greater discrimination at work, they are significantly more likely to report lower job satisfaction and greater work stress than minority workers. A similar pattern was not observed, however, with respect to life satisfaction, a broader measure of overall well-being.

In H3, we posited that White employees will report a greater propensity to leave their organization when they perceive discrimination at work relative to minority employees. As expected, race was found to moderate the influence of perceived discrimination on intentions to leave one's organization ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$). As illustrated in Figure 4, perceived discrimination was significantly positively associated with turnover intentions relating to one's organization for White (simple slope = 0.13 , $p < 0.01$) but not minority employees (simple slope = -0.12 , *ns*). Overall, this finding is in line with H3 and suggests that White employees are more likely than minority employees to respond to perceived discrimination by expressing a desire to leave their organization.



Finally, H4 proposed that White employees will be less inclined than minority employees to leave their career field when they perceive discrimination at work. As evidenced in Table 2, however, race did not moderate the influence of perceived discrimination on employees' intentions to leave their career field ($\beta = -0.07, ns$), suggesting that White and minority employees do not differ in their tendency to express a desire to leave their career field in response to perceived discrimination.

To test for possible gender differences, supplemental analyses were conducted to test whether gender may combine with race to jointly moderate the above hypotheses (i.e. H1a; H2–H4). The results from regression analyses testing the three-way interaction of perceived racial discrimination \times race \times gender did not reveal significant effects for any of the work outcomes tested ($p > 0.05$). Interestingly, however, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction of race \times gender on perceived discrimination ($F(1, 695) = 17.49, p < 0.001$). *Post hoc* Bonferroni tests indicated the minority females ($M = 2.76$) reported significantly higher levels of perceived discrimination relative to minority males ($M = 2.01$), White males ($M = 1.33$) and White females ($M = 1.26$).

In summary, our results indicate that minority employees are more likely to perceive discrimination in the workplace, and this effect appears to be stronger for minority females

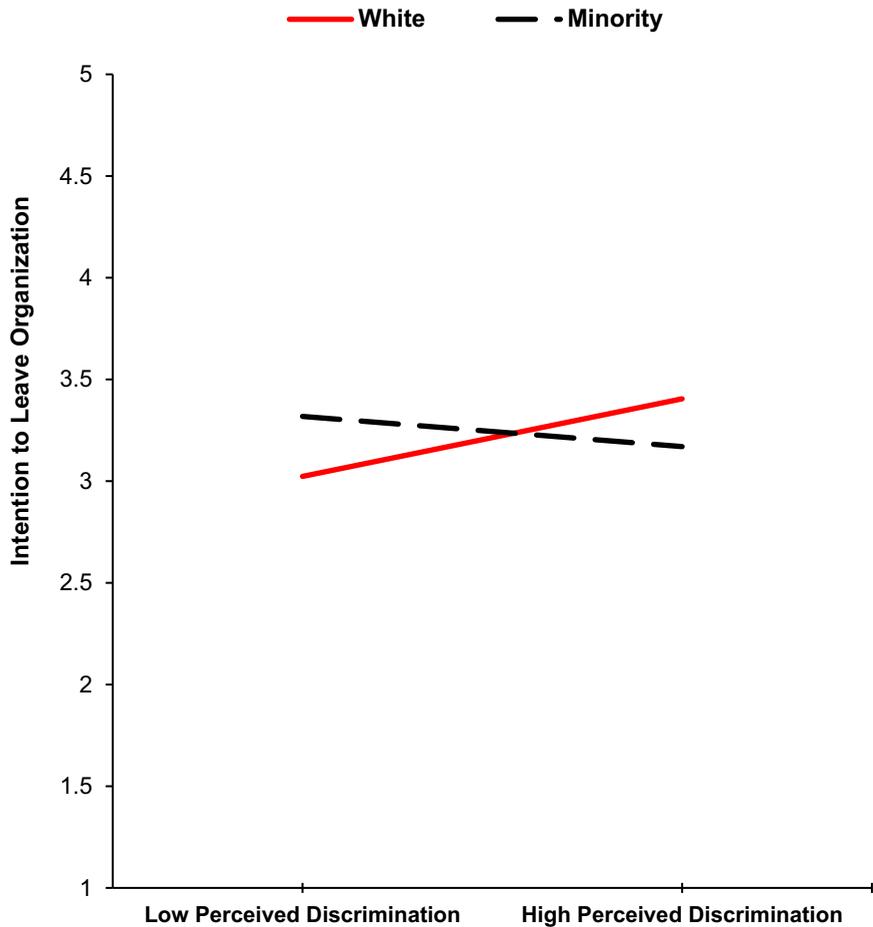


Figure 4.
Race as a moderator of
the relationship
between perceived
discrimination and
intentions to leave
one's organization

compared to minority males. Furthermore, in line with prior research, perceived discrimination was negatively associated with each of the employee outcomes that we investigated. However, we also found that several of these relationships were moderated by the employee's race. Specifically, the effects of perceived discrimination on job satisfaction, work stress and turnover intentions from the organization are stronger for White than minority employees.

Discussion

Drawing on DiAngelo's (2011) concept of White fragility, we examined whether Whites react more strongly to race-based stress than minorities by exploring the role of majority (vs minority) status in moderating the effect of perceived discrimination on indicators of employee satisfaction and well-being. Consistent with our predictions, White employees reported significantly higher work stress and lower job satisfaction than minority employees when perceiving greater discrimination at work, suggesting that White employees may be more sensitive to race-based stress resulting from perceived discrimination. Likewise, we

examined whether majority (vs minority) status may moderate the influence of perceived discrimination on employee turnover intentions to determine whether Whites are more likely to address perceived discrimination by leaving the situation to restore the status quo. The results revealed that White employees reported stronger intentions to leave their organization when they perceived discrimination at work than minority employees. Overall, these results are consistent with Di'Angelo's conceptualization of White fragility and suggest that because of their privileged position and lower exposure to race-based stress, White employees may: (1) report more negative work outcomes from perceived discrimination at work and (2) be more inclined to act to neutralize the negative effects of perceived discrimination by, for example, expressing intentions to leave their employer.

It is interesting to note that the effects of perceived discrimination did not differ between White and minority employees with respect to their overall life satisfaction. Because Whites hold dominant status in important life domains (e.g. education, employment, housing), perceived discrimination at work appears to more directly influence their work perceptions (lower job satisfaction, higher work stress) rather than their more general perceptions of well-being. Indeed, our results suggest that White employees (but not minority employees) may cope with perceived discrimination at work by switching employers. Whites may rationalize that they can avoid discrimination by finding another employer that does not, for example, actively promote affirmative action policies that are detrimental to themselves (Whites). By contrast, minorities may be less likely to switch employers due to internalized perceptions of racism and a possible belief that they will receive similar treatment regardless of the organization that they work for (DeBeer *et al.*, 2016). Taken together, these findings support Di'Angelo's conceptualization of White fragility and suggest that Whites may be more inclined than minorities to respond to perceived discrimination at work by removing themselves from the work environment that induces race-based stress (i.e. by seeking employment elsewhere).

It is interesting to note that minority employees in our sample reported somewhat lower work stress and lower turnover intentions when perceived discrimination at work was higher (Figures 3 and 4). While we do not have direct insights from our data, we speculate that when minority employees perceive greater discrimination at work, they may suppress or contain their negative reactions in an effort to prevent negative spillover into other aspects of their life. This reasoning is consistent with the view that minorities, unlike their White counterparts, have become accustomed to frequent and pervasive discrimination (Deitch *et al.*, 2003) and consequently have developed the stamina to cope with additional discrimination. Indeed, our findings suggest that minorities are more likely to experience discrimination, especially female minorities, which has also been borne out in previous research (Berdahl and Moore, 2006; Kim and O'Brien, 2018). Minorities holding higher status jobs may also have become more habituated to discrimination due to the heightened levels of discrimination they have experienced in progressing through their careers (Greenhaus *et al.*, 1990). As our sample is comprised of professional (and highly paid) employees, minority employees may report lower turnover intentions despite perceiving increased discrimination because the opportunity cost in leaving their current position is high (Salin *et al.*, 2014) and also because they face the possibility of discrimination and challenges in securing another professional position elsewhere (see Wyatt and Silvester, 2015).

This study provides an important contribution to the research literature by empirically testing principles of White fragility in an employee sample. Although the concepts of White fragility and White privilege are starting to attract attention in both the academic literature (e.g. see Atewologun and Sealy 2014; Di'Angelo 2011, 2012; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014) and popular media (e.g. Di'Angelo, 2018; Lopez, 2017; Sears, 2018; Watts, 2016), they are understudied phenomena that warrant empirical scrutiny. Indeed, we are not aware of previous empirical work testing the concept of White fragility in an organizational context.

Based on DiAngelo's conceptualization of White fragility, we found evidence suggesting that Whites may experience more negative work outcomes from perceived discrimination (i.e. lower job satisfaction and higher work stress) than minority employees and are more likely to act to restore conditions of privilege by leaving their current job and employer. Although some recent research has suggested that White women are more likely to report White privilege and remorse fragility (e.g. feeling sad, guilty, angry) than White males (Mannheimer *et al.*, 2020; Murdoch and McAloney-Kocaman, 2019), we did not find differential effects for men and women in this study.

Previous studies have indicated that perceived racial discrimination at work can negatively influence various employee outcomes (for recent reviews, see Triana *et al.*, 2015; Triana *et al.*, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2016); however, the extent to which these effects differ based on an employee's race has remained unclear. There is some evidence suggesting that perceived racial discrimination may result in more negative work attitudes when a higher proportion of minorities is included in a given study (Triana *et al.*, 2015a; Triana *et al.*, 2015b). Other recent meta-analytic findings (Jones *et al.*, 2016) have indicated a negligible moderating effect of employee race on the relationship between perceived discrimination and work outcomes. As racial minorities begin to assert their rights at work and in society at large (e.g. through the Black Lives Matter movement), Whites may be beginning to perceive more significant threats to their privilege and identity (see Holliday, 2017; Chua, 2018). Indeed, there is recent evidence signaling that the effects of perceived discrimination on work outcomes such as withdrawal (turnover) intentions may be stronger for White employees (e.g. DeBeer *et al.*, 2016). Overall, our results reinforce and extend this work, demonstrating that the deleterious impact of perceived discrimination on employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, work stress and turnover intentions from one's employer, may, in some cases, be stronger for White than minority employees, signaling the existence of White fragility.

In practical terms, our findings point to a need to foster a climate of inclusion for all, including White employees, while taking care to ensure that affirmative action policies do not trigger backlash and negative reactance from Whites. Our study also underscores the importance of surfacing Whiteness in organizational life and to assist White employees in understanding the significance of their own identities, which is often taken for granted and assumed to be the norm. Greater recognition of Whiteness in organizations and one's White privilege can foster greater acceptance of different cultures and ethnicities in the workplace and help build a stronger climate of inclusion (Grimes, 2002; Olson, 2002).

Limitations and future research

There are certain limitations to the study that should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design used in this research limits the degree to which causality can be inferred. Although there is a strong theoretical basis for the proposed direction of causality and prior empirical work has tended to explore perceived discrimination as a predictor of work outcomes, rather than vice versa (e.g. see Triana *et al.*, 2015a; Triana *et al.*, 2015b; Jones *et al.*, 2016), reciprocal causation is also possible. Future research with longitudinal or experimental designs is required to further establish the causal ordering of these variables. Further, although a key strength of the study is that our sample consisted of employees drawn from a broad range of work settings (multiple organizations reflecting different industries) working in a variety of different jobs, participants were well educated (over 90% of participants hold a university degree) and primarily employed in professional positions. By virtue of their higher socio-economic status, White employees in our sample may have experienced greater privilege in their lives (i.e. had less exposure to race-based stress), possibly magnifying the effects of White fragility. Likewise, there is some evidence to suggest that the negative effects of racial harassment/discrimination on employee work attitudes may be amplified when employees report a stronger career orientation (Stoermer *et al.*, 2017). The effects of discrimination may

also differ between minority groups partly as a function of one's cultural values (e.g. [Bochner and Hesketh, 1994](#); [Delgado et al., 2011](#)). Thus, it is not clear the extent to which these findings will generalize to workers in non-professional positions, or in different countries and cultures, including those that have different or no legislation supporting equity and diversity. Indeed, although discrimination is a key barrier to the integration of minorities in Europe (e.g. [Constant et al., 2009](#)), further research is needed exploring employee reactions to discrimination in a European context. Research conducted in different cultural settings, exploring different minority groups and including both professional and non-professional positions will be particularly valuable in testing the generalizability of our findings and further advancing our understanding of the concept of White fragility and its impact on both majority group and disadvantaged employees.

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